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ABSTRACT

In 1992 the Texas Education Agency selected 83 schools to participate in its Partnership Schools Initiative (PSI), which had the goals of improving outcomes for students and closing the performance gaps among various student groups. The schools were allowed flexibility in the process used to achieve these goals. One of the partnership schools, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo High School (PSJA), was chosen for a case study of school reform. At PSJA, low-income students make up 80 percent of the student population, 98 percent of whom are Hispanic. A large school near the Mexican border, PSJA was experiencing transitions and overcrowding. The school's improvement plan utilized a three-pronged approach: change staff's mental frameworks through monthly staff development sessions, heighten students' attitudes and expectations through retreats and workshops, and improve parents' understanding of their role in children's learning through parenting classes and workshops. Lessons learned about the school improvement process are: (1) even a large staff can be involved in developing a school improvement plan; (2) professional development has a greater impact when provided to the faculty as a whole; (3) communicating a school vision to staff development providers can aid in developing a shared vision in a large school; (4) reflection and critical inquiry are important components of staff development; (5) the changing of attitudes is a worthwhile goal; and (6) a principal's assistance and flexibility can help compensate for scarce resources. Also discussed are impediments to school improvement (poor working conditions, rigid fiscal policies, and lack of teacher monitoring) and benefits of the PSI triad approach--a collaboration among schools, regional education service centers, and the state education agency. (TD)

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# Changing Mental Frameworks:
# One High School's Success through a Triad Partnership

**ISSUES . . . about Change**

**Volume 3, Number 2**

**1994**

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Volume 3, Number 2 1994

# Issues . . . *about Change*

## Changing Mental Frameworks: One High School's Success through a Triad Partnership

The challenge for schools is to develop and implement practices that enable all students to learn and thrive in school. It used to be that students had to change to fit the school, but now more and more schools are changing to fit the student (Lawton, Leithwood, Batcher, Donaldson, and Stewart, 1988). In the call for school restructuring, educators question the assumptions underlying our educational system and contemplate totally different school structures. They also promote revamping the school culture and altering the relationships among students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the community.

In January 1992 the Texas Education Agency (the state department of education in Texas) selected 83 schools to participate in its Partnership Schools Initiative. The goals of this initiative are to improve outcomes for students and to close the performance gaps that currently exist among various student groups. While the goals are fixed, the selected schools are allowed flexibility in the *process* they use to achieve these goals. The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) selected one of the partnership schools in spring 1992 for a case study of school reform. This school near the Mexican border, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo (PSJA) High School, used a three-pronged approach with staff, students, and parents to alter the attitudes and mental frameworks that guide their actions. The story of this school highlights the value of setting a goal that addresses mental frameworks and using a three-pronged approach to "reculture" the school (Fullan & Miles, 1992). In addition, the unique relationship that the Partnership Schools Initiative engendered between the school and the agencies that oversee it offer valuable lessons in systemic reform.

### Formation of the Triad Partnership

In the Partnership Schools Initiative (PSI), each selected school, its regional education service center, and the Texas Education Agency (TEA) are seen as partners working toward the same goals. In the south Texas area known as Region One, five participating schools work with a PSI coordinator at the regional education service center. They receive logistical support from the PSI coordinator and financial support from TEA. The initiative infuses dollars not otherwise available to the partnership schools; special funds, for example, made it possible for the principals from all five schools to attend leadership training arranged by the PSI coordinator. Acting as an external facilitator, the PSI coordinator also assists each school on an individual basis. For PSJA, for example, she has helped to plan and conduct a series of monthly staff development sessions.

This initiative allows partnership schools greater flexibility. Placing relative emphasis on *outcomes*, TEA has de-emphasized state control of the *process* for achieving desired outcomes. It has made the waiver application process easier for selected schools, so that they can more readily obtain waivers of rules and regulations. For PSJA, the limit on days devoted to staff development was increased from six to 10. This is one way that TEA has promoted more flexibility in policies and procedures that govern school operations.

### Brief Description of the School

Pharr-San Juan-Alamo High School is a large school in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, where some of the poorest counties in the U.S. are located. Low income students make up 80 percent of the student population, 98% of whom are Hispanic (Texas Education Agency, 1993). In the 1991–92 school year, 31 percent of the students passed all tests for the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS).

At the end of the 1991–92 school year, PSJA

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faced three formidable challenges in the year ahead. First was a transition in grade-level composition. Originally a 9–12 campus for 17 years (1963–1981), the school served only the 10th–12th grades for nine years (1981–1990), and only the 9th and 10th grades during the 1990–91 and 1991–92 school years. In spring 1992, PSJA geared up to become a complete four-year high school again in the 1992–93 year. These transitions in grade-level composition caused significant turnover, which had a destabilizing effect on relationships among staff.

Second, overcrowding was a problem. The school was already crowded when ten of 32 portables were removed from the campus before the start of the 1992–93 year in anticipation of a decline in enrollment that never occurred. The decline was projected because the number of ninth and tenth graders being transferred out was expected to exceed the number of juniors and seniors being transferred in. Although enrollment never actually declined, the ten portables were never replaced.

Third, the sheer size of the school made communication and coordination difficult. Spread out over 40 acres, the school had some 160 professionals, 60 paraprofessionals, and 2500–2800 students. The number of students varied throughout the year, increasing after the start of the school year as migrant students gradually arrived, peaking at the turn of the calendar year, and decreasing thereafter as migrant students gradually departed during the remainder of the school year. Low student attendance and gangs were other problems.

Because of the transitions, overcrowding, and sheer size of the school, many staff did not know each other. Teachers had little input in school decisions and lacked a feeling of ownership. One of the school's strengths, however, was that young staff were willing to learn and implement new teaching strategies.

### School Leadership

Because the school was so large, a four-tiered hierarchical structure was in place. Under the principal were seven assistant principals with different areas of responsibility. In addition to managing such areas as security and testing, each assistant principal supervised some of the department heads, who in turn, supervised the teachers. The school was blessed with strong department heads with leadership skills.

The principal had previously held a variety of positions within the district. He taught both first grade and sixth grade before becoming the principal of an elementary school that served grades 3–6. This "intermediate campus," as it was called, was recognized by the State Board of Education in 1988 as an "Academic Recognition Campus." In 1989–90 he became principal of a ninth grade center, and the following year he was asked to take over as principal of PSJA High School. Looking back on it later, he realized how naive he had been about the challenge he accepted. As was typical of high schools, the teachers were focused on their subject areas. At the elementary school, his staff had had a common vision that children could learn and their purpose was to help *all* students—no exceptions. Students had been their number one priority. They had cared about their students, and they had worked well together. Using his experience at the elementary level to his advantage, he set out to widen the focus at the high school on the whole child and his or her affective development. He sought to heighten teachers' efficacy and sense of responsibility for the success of their students.

### The Three-pronged Approach

In summer 1992, PSJA had to submit a PSI improvement plan for the 1992–93 school year. Its plan focused on the school's human elements in the belief that feelings that staff, students, and parents had about themselves, their homes, their relationships, and the school environment were affecting student outcomes. School leaders hoped to heighten expectations—including the expectations that students had of themselves—and thereby increase students' chances of success.

To improve the attitudes of students, staff, and parents concurrently, school leaders relied on a three-pronged "development" approach: (1) change staff's mental frameworks through monthly staff development sessions; (2) heighten *students'* attitudes and expectations through retreats and Saturday workshops; and (3) improve parents' understanding of their role in children's learning through parenting classes and workshops for parents.

In fall 1992, there were signs that the school was struggling. With juniors and seniors back in the school for the first time in three years, expanding the curriculum, enhancing extracurricular activities, and planning for graduation became priorities. Testing and sudden changes in scheduling were also diverting attention away from the PSI plan. The first in-service in September 1992, however, had been a success, and more activities were planned to target the attitudes, relationships, and mental frameworks of staff, students, and parents.

**Development of Staff**

School leaders made a point of treating staff as accomplished professionals. They were asked to give input on how to increase test scores and design lessons that addressed the state's academic objectives. A campus council was established to promote site-based management, and much of the burden of decision-making shifted from the principal to the council. Each department elected a council representative who was generally, but not necessarily, the department head. The elected representatives relayed information and issues to the teachers in their departments and returned to the next campus council meeting with feedback from those teachers. Refreshments at meetings, incentives for good performance, and a teachers' luncheon were steps taken to enhance the social climate of the school.

PSJA sought and received a waiver to increase the time devoted to staff development to one day per month. The topic of the first in-service in September 1992 was Life Management Skills (LMS). Through activities and working in groups, staff focused on themselves as persons, family members, and teachers. They got to know one another on a personal level and shared their best and worst experiences with teaching. Several members of the faculty commented on the value of this session. One teacher, who had worked at the campus for many years, referred to it as the most valuable training she had ever received at the school. She described the poignant impact of the video Classroom of the Heart, in which a teacher tried to understand students in light of their background and particular circumstances. Overnight she began to question her own attitude toward some of her students, thinking freshly that perhaps they *could* do better in school. "I had never before felt myself change so quickly," she said. This session was so well received that the school devoted a second in-service day to Life Management Skills later in the year.

At another in-service, data were presented on each teacher's rate of failing students to underscore teachers' responsibility for the success of their students. Several staff reported contacting parents more frequently concerning the students in their classes.

At an in-service held late in the year, school leaders involved staff in a review and revision of its campus improvement plan. Approximately 200 professional and paraprofessional staff members worked alternately in small and large groups to revise the plan in a single day.

**Development of Students**

On a campus with nearly 3000 students and more than 200 staff, it is easy for students to disappear in the masses. Teachers work in earnest to prepare students for the future, forgetting that students in high school are dealing with their own emotional and physical development, peer pressure, problems at home, drugs, violence, and a myriad of other social problems. To deal with these problems, school leaders organized a Life Management Skills retreat for at-risk students plus four Saturday workshops during the same period that it held monthly in-service days for staff. Like the LMS sessions for staff, these activities gave students the opportunity to focus on how they felt about school, how they related to their peers, and how they communicated their feelings to faculty, friends, and parents.

To deal with gang-related and other problems, the principal designated two staff "liaisons"—a man and a woman—to assist male and female students, respectively. Through individual counseling and support groups, these liaisons worked with both gang members and students who feared the gangs, serving as their advocate in matters involving their teachers or parents. A local police officer, who specialized in gang activities, often gathered two of the rival gangs to discuss their concerns and differences. He helped them to arrive at possible solutions and even arranged athletic events for different gangs in the community.



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Students who performed well were given pins symbolizing the school mascot and treated to special activities away from the school that were often sponsored by local businesses.

**Development of Parents**

The first parent meeting was organized early in the school year to address gang violence at school. From this meeting, the following was learned:

- Parents felt unwanted at school.
- Parents felt it was difficult to change their children's behavior at this age.
- Parents discovered that their children were not the same at school as they were at home.
- Parents were not aware of laws that affected their children and other juveniles.

This first meeting led to monthly parent meetings that addressed these four issues. These meetings, in turn, led to training sessions on parenting skills that are still going on throughout the school district. Despite the problem of overcrowding, a "parent room" was set aside as a place where parents were welcome to visit or do volunteer work. A minimum of four parents staffed the room on a daily basis. The principal wanted parents to feel that PSJA was *their* school—not just their child's. He sought ways to build bridges between the parents and the school. Activities for parents stressed how important it was to be involved with their children's school, to communicate with the teachers, and to help out when possible.

Near the end of the school year, the school dedicated a day of in-service to hold "Community Day," a celebration especially for the seniors where students, staff, and community members enjoyed games, activities, and music. Each department contributed to the festivities in one way or another. A play showed a day in the life of a new teacher during the first week of school, and a role-play contrasted different communication styles between teachers and students. With gangs active on and off campus, the leaders took a risk to hold this event, but it attracted a good turnout. Community Day enhanced school pride and crystallized the feeling that teachers, students, and parents genuinely cared about each other and could work together in a cohesive way.

**Lessons on School Improvement**

General lessons to be learned about the school improvement process are described below.

1. Even a large staff can be involved in developing or revising a school improvement plan.

One day of in-service was set aside for staff to revise the campus improvement plan. The PSI coordinator divided the staff into two large groups of approximately 100 each that were further broken down into subgroups of about ten people. Each subgroup discussed one of the eleven objectives in the original school improvement plan being revised. By working alternately in small and large groups to review and revise different portions of the plan, the faculty as a whole had a chance to participate in updating the plan. Although the logistics were difficult, the school demonstrated that it is possible to involve even a very large group in the development and revision of a school improvement plan.

2. Professional development has a greater impact on organizational development if it is provided to the faculty as a whole.

Training and development were the cornerstone of the leaders' initiative to change attitudes. Since many staff did not know each other, the leaders began the year with a session on Life Management Skills and provided staff development on a monthly basis thereafter. Staff were generally enthusiastic about all the training they had received but especially liked the Life Management Skills and the session that involved them in revising the campus improvement plan. During interviews, several people indicated that staff were "more unified," working "more together," or working more "like a family." This organizational development could only be achieved by providing professional development to the staff as a whole. Individual staff development and group-oriented development serve very different purposes (Anderson, Milstein, and Greenberg, 1993). Individual professional development may enhance the skills and abilities of an individual, change his or her outlook or understanding, or rejuvenate that

person's motivation, but it is not likely to have much impact on working relationships or shared vision. By comparison, staff development provided for a group as a whole, as was done at PSJA, establishes common ground for a group and a common understanding of goals and how to achieve them. It gets people working together more effectively to achieve the goals of an organization.

Interestingly enough, at the end of the 1992–93 school year, teachers suggested at a campus council meeting that they could provide staff development to each other in 1993–94. Although they appreciated the staff development provided by outside consultants, they valued the expertise of staff within the school and were ready to learn from each other. A related idea was "switching," whereby two teachers would agree to switch roles. The PSI coordinator originally suggested switching roles, and the staff development committee brainstormed ways to make it work. With help from each other in preparing the lessons, the teachers would maintain the quality of the lesson while modeling themselves as learners in front of students. Moreover, switching might facilitate interdisciplinary instruction. While these ideas partially reflected past experience with peer coaching, they also grew out of the in-service described above in which staff worked to revise the campus improvement plan. Staff participation in the plan revision process had the unifying effect of focusing their attention on goals they could accomplish together. A climate of innovation and continuous improvement was beginning to emerge.

The effectiveness of the staff development program appeared to hinge on the role of the PSI coordinator, who had a strong background in staff development. She honed the leaders' skills at planning and delivering training. The leaders learned to appreciate the importance of preparing and planning for everything from the goals and agenda to the name tags and grouping arrangements.

3. Communicating a vision for the school to staff development providers can aid in developing a shared vision in a large school.

In addition to assisting with the planning and delivery of staff development sessions, the PSI coordinator urged school leaders to articulate their vision to the staff development providers. By investing time up front with the trainers to explain what they hoped would be achieved in the sessions, the leaders made the staff development program more successful than it might have been otherwise. Sharing the vision with the trainers helped the leaders to see that they needed also to communicate their vision more generally throughout the school.

School-wide projects may also help to shape a vision by drawing teachers together around a common focus. "Community Day," described earlier, is a good example of such a school-wide project.

In reality, a change in attitudes can be viewed as a change in vision. Vision, attitudes, and expectations are inextricably linked. In view of how large the faculty was, the principal favored the formal process of staff development to communicate his vision over more informal communication channels such as meetings or one-on-one interactions. Staff development is a means for developing and communicating vision.

4. Reflection and critical inquiry are important components of effective staff development.

The PSI coordinator debriefed with the administrators and key teachers immediately after each staff development session and again a few days later to discuss how effective the day had been and any changes that needed to be made. Immediately after the session was a good time to debrief because one's memory of how the day went was fresh, making it easy to remember the details of what went well and what could be done differently. It was equally important to debrief a few days later, however, when staff had had a chance to contemplate how they might use what they had learned and the major points stood out more clearly. Members of a faculty need time to revisit goals, reward progress, and reflect on what is working and what is not. Time must be given to readjusting their organizational process, instructional strategies, and curriculum focus on a continuous basis.

5. Changing attitudes or mental models is a worthwhile goal.



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School leaders provided staff development for the purpose of changing attitudes directly. Their approach might be summarized as follows:

a. Staff development
b. Change in the attitudes and beliefs of teachers, students, and parents
c. Change in the classroom practices of teachers
d. Change in the learning outcomes of students

This approach to changing attitudes directly would appear to contradict some theoretical models, in which a change in behavior precedes a change in attitudes. One of these models is the theory of cognitive dissonance in the field of psychology. In studies of cognitive dissonance, people were induced to behave in a certain way that purportedly generated an uncomfortable feeling of dissonance between the behavior and their moral or ethical beliefs. After behaving as they did, their beliefs appeared to change to align with their behavior, as though they resolved the dissonance by changing their beliefs. In the field of education, Guskey (1986) proposed a similar model. A change in attitudes is the last step in the sequence outlined by Guskey:

a. Staff development
b. Change in the classroom practices of teachers
c. Change in the learning outcomes of students
d. Change in the attitudes and beliefs of teachers

Guskey's model notwithstanding, the approach used at PSJA appears to be valid. While the indirect process outlined by Guskey may explain many attitude changes, it appears nevertheless worthwhile to attack attitudes directly in some situations. Although the goal of changing attitudes seemed vague to SEDL's researchers at first, the value of focusing on attitudes became apparent by May 1993. In interviews conducted at that time, most staff commented that communication had improved and teachers were working more collaboratively. While the school has only begun the process of improving classroom practices, it appears to have taken a giant step forward toward creating a climate conducive to change.

6. Assistance and flexibility help compensate for scarce resources.

The principal is known for dipping into his own pocket to assist a student or teacher as the need arises. He may pay for food at a faculty function, for example, or buy an item for a student. Examples of his generosity are cited by some staff as evidence that students are a high priority for him and he cares about his staff. Being generous with one's own personal resources is a matter of personal choice, of course, but for PSJA's principal, it both solves immediate problems and sets an example that favorably impresses many members of his large staff.

Despite the school's huge size and hierarchical management structure, the principal maintains an "open door," providing assistance to staff, students, and parents when they need it. Assistance and flexibility are key elements in the entire Partnership Schools Initiative. The state department of education acts as a partner whose role is to support the school and assist in eliminating barriers to student achievement.

The PSI coordinator regularly submits a report to the Texas Education Agency on the progress of the PSI schools in her region. According to instructions from the agency, she describes the progress of each school as (1) moving toward its PSI goals on schedule, (2) progressing slowly, or (3) making minimal progress. When the state department's PSI staff see a report of minimal progress, they call and ask "What can we do to help?" This approach is a refreshing departure from the typical relationship between a school and the state education agency, which usually puts emphasis on monitoring schools' compliance with its procedures.

The Partnership Schools Initiative is specifically designed to give more flexibility in rules and regulations through a waiver application process. By allowing a waiver to be approved by the regional education service center rather than the state education agency, the state agency has streamlined the approval process. PSJA hesitated to take full advantage of this waiver process, however. Until fall 1993, the only waiver the school sought was an increase in the number of staff development days normally allowed, from six to ten. Like the Chinese woman, whose tightly bound feet

would hurt if the straps were loosened too quickly, the school wanted freedom to come gradually enough so that the district and community would accept it. But this, too, is changing. PSJA has since pushed its first waiver not related to staff development through the approval channels.

## Impediments to School Improvement

### Working Conditions

Time and space are needed to plan, prepare lessons, solve problems, and make decisions. PSJA lacks both. Some teachers must leave their homerooms during their planning periods so that other "floating" teachers may use the rooms for classes. That teachers cannot occupy their rooms during their conference periods is problem enough, but the "floaters" have no homeroom at all. Moreover, no suitable alternatives are available. The teachers' lounge is not an acceptable option because it does not afford privacy and quiet—not to mention access to materials—needed for truly productive use of time.

Good working conditions constitute a form of assistance often overlooked. The school is required to turn off the air conditioning when school is dismissed. The district thus saves on utilities perhaps, but staff are discouraged from working after school because temperatures are unbearably hot for much of the year. This trade-off illustrates that staff need suitable working conditions to make the best use of time.

### Policies and Regulations

Resources are frequently encumbered with rules about how they may be used. Some rules restrict how a school may use available resources, while in other cases the school must devote precious time to living within the rules, providing required documentation, or accounting for expenditures. PSJA's principal has emphasized the need for more flexibility in fiscal policies. He cites a lack of human resources in the surrounding community from which to draw and wants financial flexibility to bring in people from other areas who, he believes, can help his school. Rigid fiscal policies, such as fixed rates per hour or day, make it difficult to pay trainers appropriate compensation that takes into account the complex circumstances surrounding their services or their level of expertise. Complexities of this nature call for judgment and flexibility, not rigid adherence to rules.

### Delegation and Monitoring

Delegation and monitoring go hand in hand. With monitoring, one can delegate and still ensure that delegated tasks are done. With delegation, one has time to monitor. At PSJA, as at many other schools, monitoring appears to be the weak link in the school improvement process. For example, each department chair sacrificed a planning period normally used for monitoring teachers in order to provide more remedial instruction to students (the planning period was later reinstated so that monitoring of teachers could be resumed). In general, school leaders need to hone their delegation and monitoring skills.

### Climate for Change

When staff were asked in May 1993 to describe some new ideas they had tried during the school year, they were not quick to think of "new ideas" and the ideas they mentioned tended to fit the traditional model of direct teaching in the classroom. Evidently the interest in "switching" roles and other innovative ideas that was observed at the May 1993 campus council meeting has not radiated out to the teachers who do not participate in council meetings. The meetings are open to everyone, but many faculty members choose not to stay after school to attend the meetings. Nor is attendance at in-services as high as it could be. While these factors reflect a need for improvement, they also reaffirm the principal's goal of changing the mental frameworks that guide the teachers' actions. More staff development and school-wide projects are needed to cultivate new ideas and a norm of continuous improvement. The changes that are needed to improve student outcomes will take time. According to staff, however, working relationships, communication, and decision-making all improved during the 1992–93 school year. This was quite an accomplishment for such a short time.

## Benefits of the Triad Partnership

The Partnership Schools Initiative is a collaboration between selected schools, regional education service centers, and the state



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education agency. In a three-tiered structure, PSJA works with the PSI coordinator at Region One Education Service Center, who in turn acts as a mentor and go-between, enhancing coordination between PSJA's efforts and the Texas Education Agency. In this triad partnership, the school has the benefit of an external facilitator and other outside resources stemming from its participation in the Partnership Schools Initiative.

The three-tiered structure promotes direct and indirect networking among schools. In each region the PSI coordinator works with the schools selected from the region both individually and as a group. And the PSI coordinators from all the regions meet on occasion with the state education agency. (SEDL contributed additionally by involving PSJA in meetings with other schools and promoting an understanding of the school improvement process.)

The Texas Education Agency has assumed a supportive role in the partnership by providing financial resources, meeting regularly with the PSI coordinators across the state, and granting waivers to certain regulations such as the limit on staff development days. Of course, even the commissioner of education is bound by state and federal laws; thus, he lacks the authority to grant waivers in certain areas, such as competitive bidding or restrictions on extracurricular activities. Advocates for change must understand the forces from many levels that work against change.

The school has begun its journey toward improvement. Like other schools, it faces obstacles that are not easily overcome: its sheer size, severe overcrowding, and history of major transitions. But the staff are now more unified and working better together toward common goals. For some staff, Community Day is proof that change is actually occurring at the school. Despite the obstacles, they are galvanized to work for a picture of the future that is coming into sharper focus. The picture they see on the horizon gives them hope that they will get there in the future. And someday the future will be today.

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